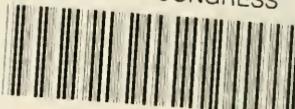


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TO MARK THE ROUTE OF THE OREGON TRAIL.

MAY 12, 1908.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed.

Mr. McCall,

from the Committee on the Library, submitted the following

R E P O R T .

[To accompany H. R. 20477.]

The Committee on the Library, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 20477) authorizing the President to appoint a commissioner to supervise the erection of monuments and markers and locate the general route of the Oregon trail, recommend that the bill be passed.

The Oregon trail was one of the "great battlefields" of the country. The committee quotes the following dramatic description, written by Hon. Ezra Meeker, of Puyallup, Wash., who was one of those who went over the trail more than a half century ago and who speaks from personal experience. He has by his own efforts, and largely at his own expense, marked the trail, and to him more perhaps than to any other individual is due the interest in the subject that has led to its consideration by Congress.

Made possible by the discovery in 1824 of that wonderful gap in the Rocky Mountains known as the "South Pass," the Oregon trail did not become a national highway until Bonneyville and Wyeth in 1832 and 1833 traversed the whole length, from the Missouri River to the tide waters of the Pacific. The missionaries, trappers, and traders soon wore a visible wagon track to the traders' rendezvous on the Green River and beyond to Fort Hall on the upper reaches of Snake River, but not until the greater immigration of the Oregon home seekers, a thousand strong, with their wagon train in 1843 passed over to the Pacific, did the Oregon trail become in fact a great national highway. Each year thereafter wagon trains passed over the whole route to the Oregon country in varying numbers, wearing the track deeper and deeper until finally the greater exodus of 1852, when a column 50,000 strong moved out from the Missouri River and lined the trail with the dead, 5,000 or more in number for that one year alone. Meanwhile the Mormon migration had followed in the track of the Oregon pioneers for fully a thousand miles to the great bend of Bear River. The California movement of 1849 and later also followed in the same track to Bear River or to Fort Hall, where the California trail diverged, as did the Mormon track also, and bore off to the southwest, while the Oregon trail kept steadily on to the northwest.

The trail had indeed become a great national highway 2,000 miles long. Fully 300,000 people crossed over what might be termed the "eastern section" before the advent of the Pacific railroad, which diverted the later traffic, and the trail again

became a solitude, but not until fully 5,000,000 head of stock passed over, either east or west, and had worn the trail so deep that the track in places might readily be mistaken for great railroad cuts.

The object of marking this historic trail is the same as the marking of any other great battlefield of history. The winners of the farther West that passed over this trail fought a strenuous battle, and the trail became a battlefield from one end to the other. Six dead to the mile upon a stretch of 400 miles up the Platte tells the ghastly story. Nor was this all. The fallen could be counted in groups of fifties and seventies beyond where this count was made. History does not record the battlefield of greater carnage than that of the Oregon trail; neither is there any record of so long a trail or of one that wrought such historic changes. The joint-occupancy treaties with Great Britain left the settlement of the Oregon boundary virtually to be determined by a race as to whom should, as home builders, occupy the country first. The Hudson Bay Company began bringing in settlers from the Red River of the North, and not until the opening of the Oregon trail for wagons to the Oregon country, with their precious freight of home builders, was the question settled as to the preponderance of the American settlement over that fostered by the Hudson Bay Company. Immediately this was accomplished, an American provisional government was formed and the British rule ended.

No more heroic act is recorded in history than this of the Oregon pioneers holding firmly the disputed territory while many of our statesmen were decrying the Oregon country and preparing the way for a shameful surrender. The American people owe a deep debt of gratitude to those intrepid pioneers, and their trail should be marked and the memory of it preserved religiously as a great landmark in the history of the nation, not only that future generations may know that the great struggle to advance our national boundary to the Pacific, but likewise to keep alive that patriotic zeal so helpful in the perpetuation of our Government.

In the measure we keep the memories of the heroic past fresh in the minds of our people, patriotic fervor is fanned, the flag more revered, and our national stability better assured.

The quotation following is taken from a letter, read to the committee by Mr. D. B. Miller, of the Interior Department, written November 24, 1852, to Hon. Hugh Miller, Rochester, Ind., by his brother, Dr. Silas V. Miller, who moved from Fulton County, Ind., to Salem, Oreg., in 1852. This letter describes the trip over the Oregon trail, and is well worth quotation, because in all probability it records experiences had in common with many thousands of others. Doctor Miller had organized a company consisting of five teams, taking young men from his neighborhood to drive them, and using cows instead of oxen to draw the wagons, so that the company might have fresh milk. The letter is as follows, omitting some of the personal references:

Leaving Pleasant Grove, Fulton County, Ind., March 24, 1852, thence via the following towns: Monticello, Lafayette, Mellford, Independence, Atica, Danville, Ill.; Bloomington, Peoria, Knoxville, Burlington, Iowa; Middletown, Birmingham, Iowaville, Drakesville, Unionville, Gardengrove, Pisgah, Kainsville (now Council Bluffs), 772 miles, crossed the river (Missouri) at this point May 20.

North side of Platte to Fort Laramie, 574 miles. North side of Platte, 209 miles, to Sweetwater. Up Sweetwater, 107 miles, to summit of South Pass, junction of Salt Lake and Sublets Cut-off; 19 miles to Green River or Salt Lake Road; 44 miles on Keenics Cut-off to Hams Fork, where Sublets Cut-off crosses that branch of Bear River (this is a mistake, as Hams Fork flows into Green River), thence to Fort Hall, on Sublets Cut-off, 180 miles; thence on south side of Snake River or Lewis Fork of Columbia River to Fort Boise, 380 miles; thence to The Dalles, 375 miles; thence to Portland, 155 miles by water (on the Columbia); thence to Salem, 60 miles by water (on the Willamette River) to Salem, Oreg.

* * * * *

After a great deal of trouble and expense, I got in company with my teams at Iowaville. I missed them at Peoria; they took the left-hand road; they should have taken the right. We thought best to lay by for a week to recruit our teams, which we did near Iowaville.

From thence we made our way to Kainsville (now Council Bluffs). In the Western States I found no country that possessed any advantage over northern Indiana for farming. Kainsville is situated 4 miles from the Missouri River in a

ravine. The buildings are mostly small and built of logs and occupied by Mormons and teachers and only supported by travelers.

The Missouri River is a muddy deep river; in fact, all the streams in Iowa were muddy and warm.

On the 20th of May we crossed the Missouri, we rolled out 2 miles and camped; the 21st rolled 6 miles. Passed the old Mormon winter quarters. Here the Mormons, after they were driven from Nauvoo, attempted to form a city. They built a strong wall around the city. It being on Indian territory the Indians complained. The Indian agent gave them notice to evacuate the city, which they did in due time. It is astonishing the amount of work they did in so short a time, taking into consideration that during their stay in that place an epidemic broke out among them from which they died by the hundreds.

This epidemic was supposed to be some kind of a poison in the water.

On the 21st of May we formed into a company (made necessary as a means of defense against Indian attacks), 12 wagons; had our officers, etc. May 22 moved on to a creek.

There is a miserable low tribe of Indians that inhabit the country up and down the Missouri River, called the Omahaws or Ninahaws. They are harmless to all appearances.

Elk Horn is a considerable stream 30 miles from Kainsville. There was but one ferry when we were there. They charged \$2 per wagon, and carried one across every five minutes, and were behind a day when we got there. The owner of the ferry was a crusty old fellow, and the emigrants had to ferry themselves. He cleared himself \$500 per day. I understood they had put another ferry a short distance below after we passed.

For 200 miles after we crossed the Missouri we passed over a splendid prairie country. The only possible objection that could be urged against this country is the want of timber.

Twelve miles from the Elk Horn we struck the Platte River. We found good grass all the way near the river, but out from 1 to 4 miles from the river high sand bluffs follow the stream. Between these bluffs and the river is what is called "The Platte Bottom." On these bluffs there is scarcely a trace of vegetation, except occasionally some sage brush or greasewood. We found some little valleys still farther out, where we saw considerable herds of buffalo and millions of wolves and antelope of every color and size.

The antelope is something shaped like a deer; their horns fall back in a half circle; their quarters are squarer and heavier than a deer's. They run very fast and are very wild. We also saw any quantity of hare. They are nearly white and about 3 times as large as our rabbit.

West of Elk Horn and on the river (Platte) we saw the first Pawnees. They are numerous and occupy a great extent of country; they are a black, tall, slim Indian—very sneaking, beggarly, thieving class of beings. They shave their heads all but a narrow strip which runs from the corner to the back of their necks; this they have about 2 inches long; it makes them have a very wild and savage appearance. They let on to be very friendly, but if they could get any of the emigrants out where they could strip them, they did not fail to do so, and in some cases would even kill them. They are at war with all other nations from Loup Fork, which we came up some 60 miles and crossed, then struck to the Platte, 30 miles in a southwesterly direction.

The Sioux Indians inhabit to Fort Laramie. They are a large, fine looking Indian. They are also a very numerous tribe. They are trying to kill all the Pawnees. I wish them great success in their pious work.

The country from Loup fork to Fort Laramie bears a more barren appearance, though we still have grass by picking over places for grazing. We found some alkali here in places. The distance between these points is about 300 miles.

If I were going to cross again, I would use the Platte water for between these points. The water was so warm we were obliged to dig little wells and use the water which was usually cold and a little alkali.

I was talking to a mulatteer that had come up the Platte when the emigration had nearly all passed. He said that from Loup fork to Laramie the average was 6 graves to the mile. From other accounts I would think this estimate was none too great.

When we came in sight of the fort (Laramie), it looked like a settlement of houses. There was a store, the grocery, several dwellings, and the fort and soldiers' quarters, which is a long shed or stable appearing building, and the magazine house.

The fort is a long, hollow square about 30 feet high and walls about 20 inches thick, built of sunburned brick, 3 or 4 cannon mounted on the walls. There are several small rooms on the inside of this square and a kind of platform on the

inside 4 or 5 feet from the top and wide enough for six men to walk abreast. Near this is the magazine house. It is under strong guard day and night.

This squad of buildings is situated about 2 miles from the Platte on the Laramie fork.

The first fort built here was on the north side and a little up the Platte about sixty years ago. The next was built by Captain Laramie on or near the present fort. There were about 60 soldiers stationed here when we passed. The soldiers are under absolute control by their officers. They are mostly all boys and foreigners.

Four miles above Fort Laramie we struck the Black Hills. It is about 40 miles through these hills, through which the road is very rough.

We began to see some bad roads now, but nothing to what we saw after we crossed Green River. The Black Hills are covered with scrubby pine and cedar. At a distance they look black, being clothed with this dark verdure. I suppose hence the name.

From here to The Dalles (on Columbia River, Oregon) we only had patches of grass. Sometimes two or three days without any grass, then we would have a little for two or three days, then none, and so on.

From the Black Hills on there was a species of sagebrush that increased in size and quantity until we got to the summit of the Rocky Mountains.

This brush varied in size from 1 to 7 feet high. It was usually about 18 inches or 2 feet in height.

There are occasional patches of grease wood which has thorns like hawthorns, and the surface is literally covered with cactus, this vegetation increasing in quantity to the summit, afterwards decreasing.

After we left the Platte we struck for Sweetwater. Then we began to see mountains on the north and south. The mountains are piles of rock.

Every night we could hear on these mountains wild animals; the bear, wolf, and cougar. This animal is a species of the tiger.

In 50 miles we came to Independence Rock. It is about 150 feet high, 300 feet long, and is oblong. Thousands of names are cut in this rock of granite.

Five miles farther on we came to the Devil's Gate. This pass is formed by the Sweetwater as it were breaking through the spur of the Rattlesnake Mountains. The walls of the gate are about 250 feet perpendicular. We were 6 miles south of this gate on the 4th of July, where we had a celebration—an oration from a lawyer from Quincy, Ill., a fine dinner, a flag, singing, reading of the Declaration of Independence. The names of every man, woman, and child were enrolled, names of officers, and preamble all were taken on paper then pasted on a board and nailed to the liberty pole.

In addition to all the fine dishes we could usually obtain in the States to our fare was added antelope and sage fowl. It was a great day with us.

The 5th of July we started on right up Sweetwater, still rising until we came to the summit. The rise to the summit was so gradual that we could not tell from appearance when we were on the dividing ridge, though in a mile or so we came to what is called "The Pacific Springs." Here the water turned west. Nothing important transpired on the route from where we struck Sweetwater until we got to the summit. We still had trouble about feed, but our cattle looked pretty well.

We saw snow in the ravines and under ledges of rocks, and it snowed very hard the day we crossed the summit (about July 12). We went on until we crossed Green River and our company separated. Here eight wagons went to California, five took Keenes cut-off to intersect Sublets cut-off at Hams Fork of Bear River (should be Green River). Here we passed over some stupendous mountains near Hams Fork. We then came on to Bear River, where we had better grazing. We came down that stream 60 miles, but did not cross it. We left the California road and Bear River 4 miles this side of Soda Springs.

The Soda Springs are some of the great curiosities of nature. When you come within 4 miles of the springs you see two white mounds ahead. Bear River near to the left. A little farther to the left are Bear River Mountains, which are very high and commanding. To the right is Cedar Grove. You approach the mounds, you see water gushing out, bubbling and sputtering. A little basin catches nearly all the water, a little water issuing out of the basin and coursing its way down the side of the mound. When you walk on the mound it seems hollow or shelly within. You taste the water, it is lukewarm and has a strong soda taste and is rather red in appearance. You then go to the other mound a little farther to the right, 100 yards from the first. There you see a similar spring, only not quite so large and the water not quite so red. Then go 100 yards up a little stream from the last mound and you see a spring about as large as a washtub, spluttering and boiling very hard. This has no perceptible outlet, the water is clear as crystal, it is very cold and is much stronger of soda but not very unpleasant to the taste, although the gas arising from

it makes it necessary to keep your face from over it for fear of strangulation. One rod above this is a spring not quite so strong, and the water is nearly red. It is almost thick with some red substance.

About a mile below these mounds is another powerful soda spring situated on the bank of the river. The water is very cold and clear, but the gases arising therefrom are nearly sufficient to knock one down and the noise made by effervescent is loud enough to be heard as a roaring sound several hundred yards distant. One-fourth mile farther on around the bend of the river is what is known as Steamboat Spring, the bubbling and splashing produced by nature throwing the water 14 feet high. The escaping gases from this spring are also very strong.

Several old craters, dry now, show evidence of once having been springs of similar character.

We turned from this and in 3 miles left the California Road and Bear River, thence to Fort Hall, 55 miles.

I must here go back. The Crow Indians possess the country from upper crossing of Platte to summit north. We saw but one of that tribe, and that was a squaw. She was a low, heavy, black, dirty piece of God's creation. However, we traveled all the way up Sweetwater with 500 or 600 Shoshoni or Snake Indians. They were very peaceable and quiet.

From Fort Hall we kept on south side of Snake River or Louis Fork of Columbia over a sandy sage plain. Here let me say that from Fort Hall to Burnt River is the most drear and desolate country that you could imagine. It is certainly one of the most God-forsaken countries in the world. Here we suffered, here our cattle died, here we gave out, here we thought every night that we could not stand it another day, here I threw away my wagons, here we were sick, here we ran out of provisions, here we had to pay 50 cents per pound for flour.

With the exception of the sickness we had on the Platte our trip was a pleasure trip in comparison till we came to Fort Hall. After we passed Burnt River the country had a more livable appearance, grass more plentiful. Here we met many Oregonians coming out to meet their friends. They told us fine stories about Oregon, said our trouble was nearly over. I told one of them what luck I had. He asked me if I had lost any of my family? I informed him I had not. He said, "If you get through with all your family, although you lose all your property, you may consider yourself very lucky."

Arriving at the Grand Rondes we came to a very fertile valley on the Grand Ronde River where a few white traders live. Here we got a good many vegetables—we paid well for them, though. We paid a dime apiece for potatoes as large as a walnut. Other things in proportion. We came 8 miles from the Grand Rondes on the Blue Mountains through very heavy timber and crossed the Grand Ronde River. Next day we traveled 13 miles. Next day 16 miles and camped. Here we remained three days.

We proceeded thence to the Umatilla River. It is about 45 miles across the Blue Mountains and through very heavy timber. From Umatilla we came to agency, which is an old missionary station 90 miles east of The Dalles. We had a pretty hard time until we got to the Cascades. The Dalles is so named from there being natural dalles or troughs in the Columbia. From here it is 45 miles to the Cascades of the Columbia. The Columbia is a very deep river. At places it has been sounded 900 feet, I am told, without finding bottom. Many of the emigrants went from the Cascades straight to Puget Sound.



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